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HEAVY SENTIENCE

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Environments are not passive wrappings, but are, rather, active processes which are invisible. The ground rules, pervasive structure, and over-all patterns of environments elude easy perception. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*, Penguin Books, 2008, p.68.



PROEM

Built in 1967, the Brutalist building that Block 336 inhabits was originally designed as a warehouse, and has subsequently hosted a number of state, private, and urban enterprises of administrative and spiritual purpose, including offices and a conference centre, charitable organisations, community projects, and church groups. It has also been cited as a venue for illegal raves, before its conversion in 1984. Located within the basement, a sunless, aphotic zone, Block 336 retains the cooling system for the first generation computers used by Coutts Bank, who occupied the site in the 1970s. In this respect, the gallery itself might be seen to present a portal or aperture to the building's multiple pasts and presents, whilst perhaps suggesting an imprint or intelligent memory within its walls and 'ether'. It is this mercurial, contingent grounding and the sense of the site as a 'plural' being, that catalysed the subsequent collective praxis between us, and our approaches to the Heavy Sentence project.

Over a discrete period of two months, we arranged three short 'residencies' comprising reactive workshops at Block 336 that allowed us to circulate and process historical and cultural contexts and materials^{oo} relating to the site, and to bring existing concerns from our individual practices. These shared processes included a common 'pool' of accumulated information, images and texts that perpetuated a renewed cycle of research and understanding with each residency, instituting a shifting cadency, as connections inherited from previous workshops precipitated, dissolved and reconciled.



∞ POSTSCRIPT

METHODS

Circulation. Collation. Conflation. Composition. Correlation. Chronology. Collage. Contingency. Consequence. Compliance. Coalescence. Association. Accretion. Accumulation. Augmentation. Assemblage. Aggregation. Appropriation. Inhabitation. Telepathy. Surrender. Resistance. Inference. Understanding. Misinterpretation. Misrememberence. Amnesia. Interdependence. Imperception. Illumination. Obscuration. Avoidance. Reception. Reflection. Reaction. Reliance. Sensibility. Probability. Peril.

MATERIALS

Theosophy. Medieval science. Code. Myth. Memory. Mathematics. Luminescence. Gel. Photoreduction. Acid. Synthesis. Happenstance. Perception. Molecular palpability. Crystallography. Clairsentience. Constructivism. Epistemology. Fiction. Retro-futurism. Dystopia. Anthropomorphic machines. Polyphony. Glossolalia. Anachronism. Counterculturalism. Utilitarianism. Nostalgia. Noise. Currency. Faith. Systems. Concrete. Cellulose. Gold. Graphite. Film. Ink. Jesmonite. Polystyrene. Pulp.

Heavy Sentience is a concerted deliberation of artistic production in a group context, and challenges the traditional group exhibition system of curating pre-existing artworks. We worked site-responsively to create new works, and this, coupled with mutual reflexivity to our evolving independent research, meant that the process was intrinsically precarious and speculative. By surrendering degrees of individual artistic autonomy, the formulation of the project was negotiated rather than engineered. The resulting exhibition is a dense network of relationships akin to a finely attuned ecosystem, an environment suffused with an incandescent tungsten^Δ glow. Maintaining the plurality of subject and materials to be considered simultaneously without primacy, Heavy Sentience has evolved out of its very ambiguity: in which the invitation is to perceive the work through its sentient character.

^Δ derived from the Swedish tung sten, "heavy stone"





Heavy & Sentience

I admit that I did not initially know what the word sentience meant. I thought it might be some form of feeling, it sounds a little bit like sentiment. I later found out that it loosely means to be conscious of, or more perceptive to feelings, impressions, or states of being – and etymologically leads back to the Latin word *sentientem* for “being capable of feeling”.

More conscious, more aware, more perceptive: the times I feel these things, or the way I remember the times that I felt these things more deeply, are often affected by environmental circumstance. States of light are the quintessence of sentience for me. The hazy image of an orangey glow cast through the cheap blinds of my old bedroom – a tungsten glow – washing over the room as I lie in bed, is burnt on my brain; the thought fills me with an aching, heightened sense of nostalgia for things that occurred in those moments. As I imagine, or feel, this state of light, the sounds of the birds outside reoccur in my brain. Followed by the smell and touch of skin. Followed by language. In order to get to language, I have to start with the light. Perhaps sentience can only be personal, even when it is a moment of joint or collective experience – as so often experiences of heightened sentience are shared with others – just as consciousness is perhaps only individual.



The rain is pouring, heavy, outside. It is loud: excitingly, euphorically loud, as if under a waterfall. And it smells fresh, and green, and light. How is the rain so heavy? When heavy is weight, and weight is the mass of material. But weight is also history, and history is dead time, and time is just light as a memory. It disappears the moment it occurs. Heavy weighs you down, it is used colloquially to mean the experience of something deep, difficult, moving or traumatic.

My limbs are heavy each morning as I wake. Often one, or both arms will be numb, from lying flat on my front with them squashed beneath me. I wonder why, if the limb is numb, is its weight still felt? They hang heavy, like dumb-bell extensions of myself, dragging me down, as I swing them beside the bed to get the blood moving. Heavy is difficult to move. The sensation of my arm only exists when the blood is there: so does the blood make my limbs 'conscious', therefore sentient in their own right?

What would happen if your sentence became heavy? Would you feel weighed down by the depth of the experience? Or would heavy sentence be euphoric, as your understanding of the world is heightened? Are things heavier underground, with the weight of the world on top of you? Is the accumulation of occurrences, experiences, knowledge, a form of weight?

Yet, if sentence is experienced by light, sound, or smell – the ephemeral elements, the fleeting moments – then how can it be heavy? Experience is weight, every moment of existence is accumulated, in body and mind, so that memory becomes a cell like structure where parts appear and disappear, in an unknown, intangible hierarchy. Maybe that's heavy sentence.



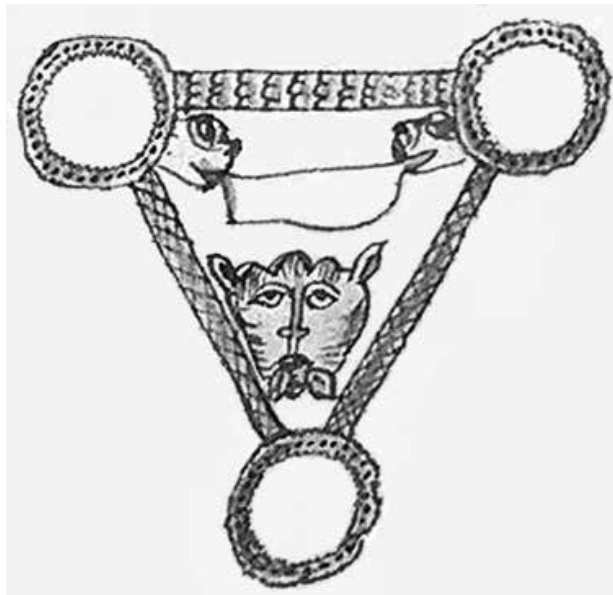
"Then this evening around six. All right?"

"We'll see." Redrick looked at his watch. It was five to nine.

Noonan waved and rolled out to his Peugeot. Redrick followed him with his eyes, called the waitress, paid the bill, bought a pack of Lucky Strikes, and slowly headed over to the hotel with his briefcase. The sun was baking hot already and the street had quickly become muggy, and Redrick felt a burning sensation under his eyelids. He squinted hard, sorry that he hadn't time for an hour's nap before his important business. And then it hit him.

He had never experienced anything like this before outside the Zone. And it had happened in the Zone only two or three times. It was as though he were in a different world. A million odors cascaded in on him at once—sharp, sweet, metallic, gentle, dangerous ones, as crude as cobblestones, as delicate and complex as watch mechanisms, as huge as a house and as tiny as a dust particle. The air became hard, it developed edges, surfaces, and corners, like space was filled with huge, stiff balloons, slippery pyramids, gigantic prickly crystals, and he had to push his way through it all, making his way in a dream through a junk store stuffed with ancient ugly furniture. . . . It lasted a second. He opened his eyes, and everything was gone. It hadn't been a different world—it was this world turning a new, unknown side to him. This side was revealed to him for a second and then disappeared, before he had time to figure it out.

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You find yourself in darkness.
Your hand reaches out and touches concrete, and
the shallow ridges that describe the grain
of timber casts.

Your fingers seek a light switch, finding nothing
but rough, man-made surface.

Pupils dilate.

It would appear that natural light does not
filter down here. By your reckoning, these must be
the depths beyond which less than one percent of
sunlight will penetrate.

Maybe even less. Maybe no light at all.
And in this dense pocket of darkness, there is the
distinct sound of singing. It appears to come from
somewhere above, elsewhere in the building. The
voices, for there are a few, are intermittent yet
fervent, funnelled through what you can only
imagine to be vents in the ceiling.

The voices describe the origins of the world.
They chorale into weird, bioluminescent forms,
and you find it pleasing in this sunless space to
imagine a source of light, produced and emitted
by a living organism. You try now to picture The
Photic Zone. It is so dark that closing your eyes is
an unnecessary part of the visualisation, but you
do it nevertheless, a reassuring emptying
of the immediate.

Images crawl across you.

You remember a film. A diorama, a spectacular
picture. You remember refracted light containing
the deepest blue, turquoise, white, then yellow
gold, amber, red.

You recall the swell of something pale in a test
tube. Then lush green foliage. Windows of light to
other, exterior spaces. Gauze. Some death, even
amongst prolific growth. Photosynthesis.

A butterfly opens its wings.

The hole of light that now opens before you
appears to have the same proportions as your own
life. From here, it looks like it could fit into the
palm of your hand.

Somewhere, in another zone, the sun comes up.

You find yourself in darkness.

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NO CENTRAL CONTROL (EXTRACT)

THE BEST GUIDES IN THIS HALF-LIT TERRITORY
ARE THE LOOSE BANDS OF MONETARY MYSTICS
AND ICONOCLASTS WHO ARE DEVELOPING
STRANGE NEW EXCHANGE TECHNOLOGIES

A CODED LEDGER
HIDDEN UNDERGROUND
ONLY MATTER HEATS
BUT THIS ABSTRACT MACHINE IS COOLING A FAITH

IF DOUBT CAN DESTROY A CURRENCY
THEN A CULT LIKE PROCESS
OF EVANGELICAL FAITH-BUILDING
CAN CREATE ONE

WE TRUST EACH OTHER TO VALUE MONEY
EVERY MONETARY TRANSACTION IS A LEAP OF FAITH
AND FAITH HAS TO BE CAREFULLY MAINTAINED

AN ECONOMIC EXPERIMENT IN REAL TIME

IF MONEY IS AN OBJECT
IT MUST BE AN ENCHANTED ONE
CHARGED UP WITH VALUE
BY A SUBTLE CULTURAL PROCESS

THE VALUE IS CIRCULAR
PREDICATED ON EACH PERSON BELIEVING
THAT OTHERS BELIEVE IN IT

PEOPLE STILL THINK OF IT AS THAT SYMBOL
ITS ALWAYS THIS WEIRD METALLIC KIND OF
IMAGERY

BUT THE STRANGE THING IS
IT IS PROBABLY THE MOST IMMATERIAL CURRENCY
OF THEM ALL

IT NEVER HAD A PHYSICAL FORM



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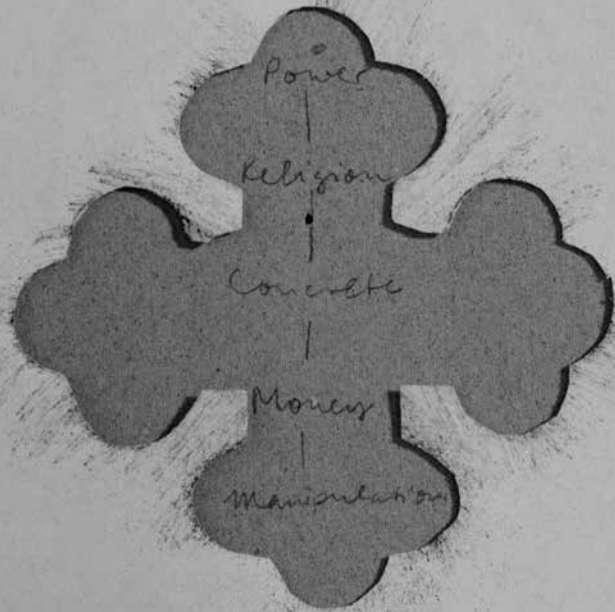




Gravity & Glue

How do we communicate with one another? Truly communicate. Not just talk, or exchange flippant, expected conversation and comment. We generally exist and enact our lives in known scenarios, where our behaviour and choices are framed by the architecture of the situation – be that physical, social or emotional. In 1974, the sociologist Erving Goffman wrote *Frame Analysis*, in which he argued that much of our behaviour is cued or prompted by ‘frames’ that constitute the context of action. Our actions are triggered by the structures in which we find ourselves, and by the objects around us – we use frames to identify what is taking place. There are expected behaviours, gestures, actions and routes of communication. How do we communicate as a group to create a system, and possibly a new one, that we can not only function in, but also creatively thrive?

Groups of artists, or more formal collectives, have historically come together to create ‘new’ ways of working or form alternative structures within which to make work. The Bauhaus built an entire school via collective working, and El Lissitzky created the support structure room for the Constructivist dream, *The Abstract Cabinet*, yet all the outputs were authored and attributed by name. More recently in 1989, the Slovenian group *Neue Slowenische Kunst* came together in former Yugoslavia, as the country was unravelling under the dictator Tito, to create alternative systems of making. They worked in groups as different ‘departments’, including *Scorpius Naisce Sisters* (theatre), *Laibach* (music), *IRWIN* (painting and performance), *Retrovision* (film and video) and *Novi Kolektivizem* (design). Looking at photographs of them together, they seem like a kind of alternative family, taking roles and living alongside each other. Their work was never attributed by name. Yet even so, within this, they formed structures and systems in which they functioned, overlapping only when they felt like it. But the things they created were ‘whole’, in that each element functioned as part of a total artwork.



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So, what occurs when systems and structures are abandoned, or willfully and conceptually rejected by a group of people, in this case artists, can creativity occur in total freeform? Or do systems, hierarchies, and frames create themselves? Heavy Sentence is a group exhibition, rather than a total artwork, yet the works, although titled, are unattributed to individuals. As such, they exist like a constellation of stars, a mini universe, created by an alternative family, acting as a network of interlinking brains. Within this constellation, there are distinct relationships and conversations occurring. Triangles repeat in multiple forms, a lion cowers under a rug, hiding behind a pillar, and from the pyramid opposite, identical twin drawings hang from the backs of support structures – the wise elder of the family, imposing his/herself on all their relations. Light weighs heavy in this world, the tungsten glow infects all the relationships on offer, alongside an acute soundtrack to a film, and the flicker of light and words from a projection deep in the back of the room – as if a television left on in another room. These conditions have a strong psychological and physical affect, that are the gravity in this universe. Perhaps this gluey gravity is the heavy sentence.

Kathy Noble, July 2014

Kathy Noble is a writer and curator, currently Artists and Programmes Curator at Wysing Arts Centre

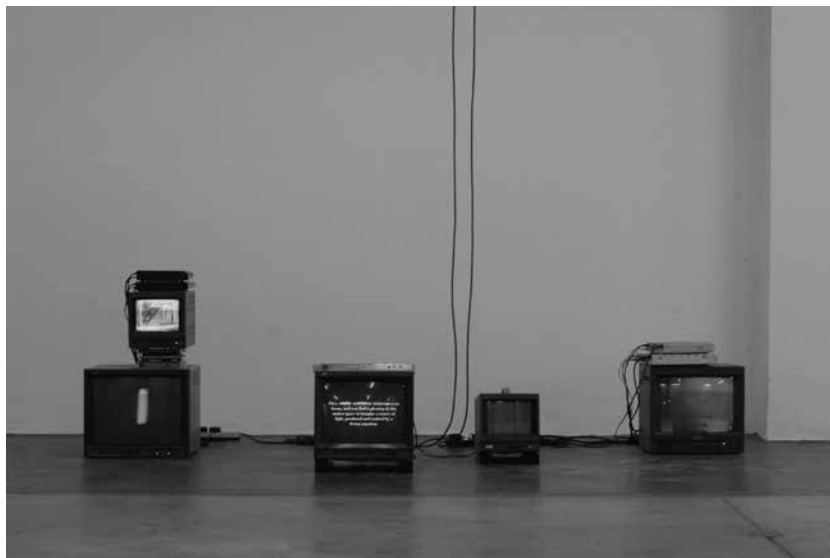


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I keep telling myself, in fact, that the entirety of the exhibition could be thought of as a sign that refers to a missing signified.

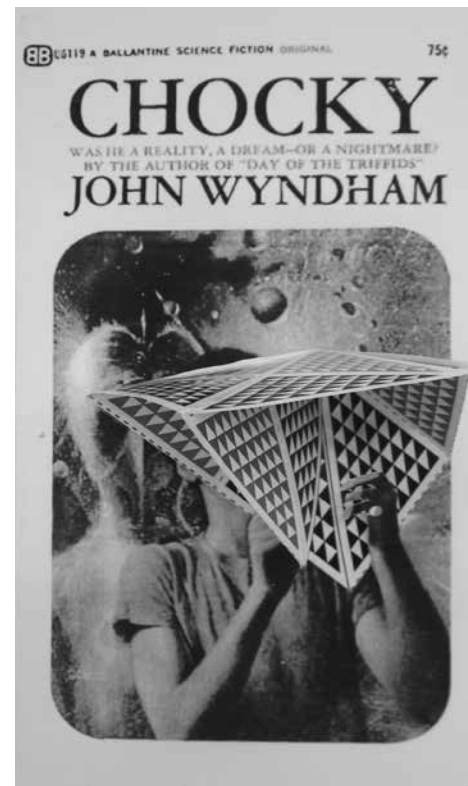
Jean-François Lyotard, 'Les Immatériaux' interview by Bernard Blistène, in Jean Baudrillard, et al., Art and Philosophy, Giancarlo Politi Editore, Milan, 1991, p.32.



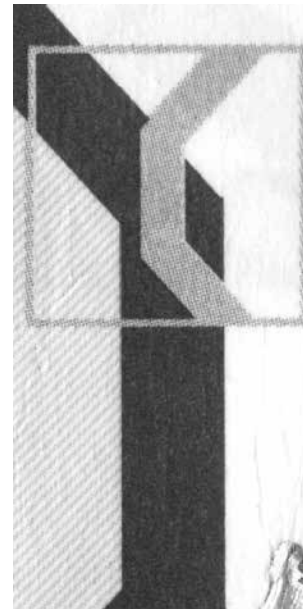
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2. Residency research image
(OBMOKhu second exhibition, Moscow, 1921)
3. Residency research image
4. Residency research images
5. Stairwell, 336 Brixton Road
6. Residency research image
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8. Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Roadside Picnic, 1971. Extract
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14. No Central Control. Script extract, including quotes from Brett Scott, Riches Beyond Belief, aeon magazine, August 2013
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16. Residency research image
17. Presentiment. Installation view◊
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24. Heavy Sentience. Installation view
25. Residency research image
26. Adaptive Behaviour Project. Video still

Unless otherwise mentioned, all installation views at Block 336, London, 2014

◊ photographs by Block 336

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